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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000143

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/SINGH
STATE FOR NEA/ELA, NEA/FO:ATACHCO

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TAGS: MARR PGOV PREL LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: FORMER MINISTER EDDE SEES CHRISTIAN SPLIT WIDENING AFTER STRIKE

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: Section 1.4 (d) .

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) The Ambassador and Poloff met over lunch on January 24 with former Minister of Culture and the current President of the Maronite League, Michel Edde. He expressed his deep concerns for the future of Lebanon after the previous day's general strike and was especially troubled by scenes of Lebanese Christians fighting each other. He thought that MP Michel Aoun had made a "big mistake" by instigating the general strike, thereby splitting the Christian community into two rival camps. The inevitable outcome of the January 23 events is to finish off any viable chance of Aoun becoming the "preferred" Christian presidential candidate. As for being a potential candidate himself, Edde did not disguise the fact that he would be willing to hold the position, but he was not seeking the presidency and would not accept the position if "any conditions" were set by the opposition. He admitted that the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) did not perform well in confronting demonstrators on January 23, but measured his comments by stating that the Army had a bigger concern about maintaining cohesion within its ranks by avoiding violent incidents that might lead to sectarian splits. While concerned by the "crazy" political situation and the endless escalation between "partisan" factions, Edde felt that there is a real opportunity now for Lebanese to unite and become one country. But they must look from within and not depend on outside powers for a political solution. End Summary.

¶2. (C) On January 24, the Ambassador and Poloff met with former Minister of Culture Michel Edde at his residence in Yarze. Also in attendance was Khalil Karam, Professor of International Relations at Saint-Joseph University. Michel Edde currently holds the Presidency of the Maronite League. One of the main functions of the Maronite League is to promote the political and cultural interests of the Maronite community in Lebanon. Edde, age 78, embodies the old Maronite nostalgia that sees the Maronite community as the main standard bearer of "one Lebanon." In his exact and oft-repeated words, without the Maronite community, "there would be no reason for the existence of Lebanon." Oh, yes, the Druse, too, he quickly added, at the Ambassador's prompting.

Aoun's Image Damaged By the Strike

¶ 13. (C) Conversation quickly turned to Michel Edde's views on the general strike and how it has affected General Michel Aoun's support in the Christian community, including his prospects for becoming president. Edde commented that by initiating the strike, Aoun had made a "terrible mistake" which would result in the further decline of his already dwindling support within the Christian community. According to Edde, the majority of Christians are furious with his blatant disregard for Lebanon's well-being and the unnecessary provocation of an already tense political situation.

¶ 14. (C) Aoun will "dearly pay for" his actions and the final result will be that he is no longer seen as the "preferred" presidential candidate among Christians. The Ambassador questioned where Aoun's followers would go, since past history has shown that the Christians become politically homeless without a strong leader. Edde conceded the point, but stated that this is one "problem" that must be overcome. The pattern of searching for the "Aoun type" of leader must be broken within the Christian community before any true consensus can be reached.

If Not Aoun for President, Then Who?

¶ 15. (C) The discussion logically led to other potential candidates who could replace President Lahoud. The Ambassador started by sharing his impressions of his meeting the previous day with Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Boutrous Sfeir. The Ambassador listed the Patriarch's requirements for the next president: he could not be from the military, he must have equal political distance from March 14 and March

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8 camps, and he must be a strong moral leader. Edde commented on two potential contenders, Maronite Justice Minister Charles Rizk and Lebanese Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh.

¶ 16. (C) Edde mused that both have a chance to win the position, but each has his political minuses. Between the two, Edde appeared more favorable toward Charles Rizk. He stated that in his opinion Rizk is "honest" and could be trusted in the position. The handicap for Rizk is that he is not in favor with many influential Christian leaders, especially the Patriarch. Therefore there is no strong political consensus in favor of Rizk within the Christian community.

¶ 17. (C) As for Riad Salameh becoming the president, Edde was more negative. He said that Salameh was "damaged goods." There is no true Christian base to support Salameh becoming president, and the Patriarch has shown no outward support for him. In addition, his relations with Syria were questionable, especially during Syria's period of occupation of Lebanon. The Ambassador stated that this was not a unique situation for many Christian leaders. Edde said that it was more than "bad relations;" the Syrians at one time wanted to "physically kill" him for his anti-Syrian stance. Edde concluded that every Lebanese President has to face reality and deal with the Syrians eventually and it is best that there be no past incident which would sour such relations.

¶ 18. (C) The Ambassador noted that some talk of Michel Edde being an acceptable compromise candidate for the presidency. Edde admitted he would be willing to hold the position, but he indicated that he was not "actively seeking" the office. In a coy manner, he said he would only accept the position if asked. He also added that he would not accept any "conditions" laid on him by the opposition. He explained that &conditions8 meant allowing extra cabinet positions for Hizballah.

**LAF: Poor Performance During the Strike,
but Cohesion is the Main Focus**

¶19. (C) Edde admitted that the LAF did not perform well in confronting demonstrators during the general strike. They should have done more to enforce security and keep the roads open. He tempered his comment by stating that in judging the army's overall performance, one should look beyond this one situation. There is the larger picture of maintaining cohesion within the ranks. It is more important to avoid a sectarian divide from developing within the LAF, especially a Sunni-Shia split. The Ambassador questioned how he could justify, to the Secretary of State, continued U.S. funding for the LAF if it is seen as a passive observer which cannot enforce basic security, especially around the U.S. Embassy area. The Ambassador shared the example of his vehicle being stopped by demonstrators setting up road blocks while the LAF just stood and watched.

¶10. (C) Edde countered that the LAF, especially General Sleiman, have to balance the need for security with the realities of maintaining command of forces. He explained that the army cannot just go out and confront the demonstrators without provoking violent incidents that might lead to sectarian splits in its organization. Edde stated that throughout the December demonstrations, the LAF had performed well in maintaining security and order in the streets. It had avoided any large violent reaction to the protest near the Grand Serail. Edde concluded that the LAF's performance should receive a good rating overall, and that serves as a justification for continued U.S. funding.

Maronite Nostalgia for "One Lebanon"

¶11. (C) Michel Edde concluded the lunch by indicating that Lebanon's political dilemma is due, in most part, to the "one-sided" approach that the March 14 and March 8 supporters have taken. He stated each side feels that only it "alone" can solve the political crisis. Neither side realizes its own partisan focus and the need to unite under the cause of establishing "one Lebanon." He reiterated that it is

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"crazy" for the Christians to be fighting each other. The Christian community, especially the Maronites, cannot afford to be divided. The sectarian demographics are not in "our favor." So unity is important. Edde felt that even with the current political deadlock, there is a real opportunity now for Lebanese to unite and become one country. Since the Syrian and Israeli forces have left Lebanon, there is finally a chance to guide "our own course," but "we must look from within" and not depend on outside powers for a political solution.

FELTMAN